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## THE MARKING OF ENGLISH THEMES

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The past ten or fifteen years have been fertile in perfecting scales for the measurement of the work of students. During the nineties Rice began to unwind the skein of values which schoolmasters, for hundreds of years, had allowed to get into a terrible snarl. Since his day so many teachers have found it entertaining to work with the knotted thread that the skein is now practically disentangled. In fact, there are at present nicely graduated scales available for all subjects of study as well as for all classroom and laboratory products. Since Dr. Hillegas adapted the original Thorndyke Scale some years ago, there has been much effort expended in various parts of the country to standardize the measurement of compositions. The hope has not infrequently been entertained that some sort of "fool proof" method might thus be perfected by applying the principles of exact science to grading.

The reason for this effort, especially in English, is ever at hand. Writing is an art; and all art is based on temperament, personality, general intelligence, character, to such an extent that it is difficult, not to say impossible, to measure it with any degree of finality. In large departments of English, where the temperament and experience of the individual instructors vary even more widely than that of the students, it is sure to follow, if each teacher is

left to his own judgment in the matter, that the grades given work of the same general character are likely to show wide diversity.

There has consequently developed a wide discussion of objective scales for the measurement of compositions. Such scales have been useful primarily in making teachers generally more intelligent as to comparative standards of grading. Where they have been used in large departments, they have lessened the divergence in marking among the various teachers; but they have also not infrequently proved irritating to individual instructors who have preferred to pay attention to such intangible qualities as taste, personality, and fluency.

When used as an actual guide in marking themes, they have, of necessity, emphasized, in the individual teacher's mind, correctness in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. These are the formal elements in writing, and a Wooley's or a Century *Handbook* makes easy work of them. But when the attempt is made to set a scale for the measurement of rhetorical principles, a liberal allowance must be made for personal judgment. Even a Barrett Wendell, with his nicety of perception and his precision, has been unable to take their measure completely. And feeling and taste belong to still a different category; they are as varied and as complex as human nature itself, so that scales can be applied to them only in a very general way. It matters not that many judgments have contributed to the composite results represented in some of the more recently derived scales; it matters not that there has been taken into account in these as nearly as is possible all the elements of writing. An expert is needed to use them successfully no less than to derive them. The individual teacher, in his attempt to apply them, has but his own erratic judgment in interpreting the values which lie outside the elements of formal correctness.

Against their use as an actual guide in marking themes, much good counsel has been given. Professor Charles Swain Thomas, chairman of the committee of teachers who helped work out the Harvard-Newton Scale, says:<sup>2</sup>

Personally, I believe that the English teachers of Newton derived genuine benefit from the making of the scale, but I have never been able to use it with

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from a letter to the author, January 23, 1919.

any degree of satisfaction—as indeed I have never been able to make satisfactory use of any scale. There are so many intangible qualities to be measured in composition that nothing purely objective is of great value.

Professor Fred Newton Scott also says:<sup>1</sup>

We ought in every way to encourage Professor Thorndyke and Dr. Hillegas in their attempt to provide us with a scale for the measurement of compositions, but when the scale is ready, we had better refrain from using it.

President Neilson, of Smith, further gives what seems to be the prevailing conviction of English teachers:<sup>2</sup>

It is important to notice that the proper field for the application of such a scale, even when perfected, is in judging the proficiency of pupils with a view to promotion or transference from one institution to another. There are other and far better tests possible for purely teaching purposes; and it would be unfortunate if so external a method of judging results were used in classroom work, in which the teacher needs to judge his pupil's attainment with reference to more specific defects than can be revealed by any such scale.

In addition to their use in marking themes, these scales have been used to determine such questions as the comparative attainment of boys and girls of the same age throughout a given city or state, or even between cities of neighboring states. They have further been applied to determine such questions as the amount of time which should rightfully be given to English composition, and the improvement which may reasonably be expected as a result. These studies have been generally approved by supervisory officers, and have stimulated a healthy spirit of investigation. There are still many important questions of conflicting personal opinion, which might well be made the subject of research during the next few years.

An effort has also been made in quite a different direction to standardize grading. The system includes not alone English but all other subjects as well. At the University of Missouri, and later at Harvard, Michigan, Oberlin, Yale, Reed, Wisconsin, and other institutions, a grading system has been more or less definitely based on biological properties. According to this system it is assumed that among a hundred students there are, on the average, certain percentages who are excellent, who are superior, who are medium, who are inferior, and who are failures. It

<sup>1</sup> *English Journal*, II, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *English Leaflet* (January, 1913).

is believed that these percentages remain constant from year to year, with the slight variation due to the fact that students are a selected group. This variation, however, is so small as not to interfere with the normal probability curve, except to skew it a trifle.

At the University of Missouri it has been found that the percentages for any given one hundred students are as follows:<sup>1</sup> excellent, 4; superior, 21; medium, 52; inferior, 16; failures, 7. At the other institutions mentioned above, the division of the one hundred students is somewhat different; but the principle is essentially unchanged.

According to this system a teacher, in making out his final grades from term to term and from year to year, should so distribute his marks that they will conform rather closely to the uniform standard adopted by his individual institution. This scale would be identical whether the teacher was grading students in English, in mathematics, in history, or in any other subject.

The attempt is admirable in that it seeks to correlate the different departments and bring about a general uniformity in result. The need is easily understood from studies which have been made at various institutions. At Iowa State College, Spinney found the following distribution of a total of 2,476 grades given by eight instructors in Sophomore Physics. The college held 75 per cent as a passing mark; 85 per cent as a credit; and 93 per cent as an honor. While there were 198 grades of 75 per cent, there were only 8 grades of 74 per cent and only 7 grades of 73 per cent; and while there were 173 grades of 85 per cent, there were only 70 grades of 84 per cent; and while there were 111 grades of 93 per cent, there were only 35 grades of 92 per cent. At George Washington University it was found, for a period covering three years, that one instructor gave not a single grade of excellent, another gave less than 1 per cent of his students this grade, while still another gave 51 per cent and another 70 per cent of his students this grade. At Cornell, Finkelstein found that in one course 78 per cent and in another only  $1\frac{1}{2}$  per cent of all the grades reported were above 85 per cent. At Missouri, Meyer reports that the

<sup>1</sup> Max Meyer, in *Science*, N.S., XXXIII, 662.

divergence of marking among teachers was, by the use of this system for five years, reduced two-thirds.<sup>1</sup> Where so many honors and class distinctions among students are based on scholarship, as indicated entirely by averaging grades, it seems imperative that some such general standard be fixed.

An adequate method for the marking of English themes should take into account the principles of these two systems.<sup>2</sup> Instead of taking a scale which was made to fit Harvard or Missouri and of attempting to apply it without modification to some other institution, however, it is much better to ask the teachers of the department, through discussion, to agree upon certain standards which will fit local conditions.

In making use of these scales there is one fundamental truth that needs strong emphasis: a system of marking themes should, in addition to giving the student a rather definite notion of the worth of his individual theme, also stimulate his industry. Too often the teacher thinks of grading entirely in terms of the single theme, and thereby loses one of the strongest weapons at his disposal for getting good work from his students. The suggestions which follow take into account the general principles of the two systems of grading and in addition make use of marks to keep the students alert, and, in spite of discouragements, willing to "carry on."

1. The marks should be made sufficiently low at the beginning to allow for their gradually being raised throughout the term or the year. The reason for this should be axiomatic. If, for example, the teacher marks his first few sets of themes strictly in accordance with any one of the objective scales, he is likely to find two or three of his best students whose work may be marked A. If he gives his highest grade at the beginning, he has taken much of the incentive for improvement from the student. It is wise, therefore, to give very rarely any grade above a C during the first month of the year and to explain the grades in terms of each student's most characteristic fault so as not to confuse

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 532.

<sup>2</sup> An interesting bibliography of one hundred titles which discuss those two systems (compiled by J. L. Zerbe) can be found in *School Science and Mathematics*, XVIII, 414.

him with a multitude of mistakes at the outset. This will frequently bring one's best students to him with the question why their marks are so low. The teacher will seldom be put to much pains to show them (in a kindly manner, to be sure) that they still have many things to learn if they expect ever to do real writing. Since improvement comes through ceaseless effort, this understanding will do the students little harm. These questions naturally lead to the second suggestion.

2. The final grade which the student receives is not necessarily an average of his individual theme grades throughout the semester. The students who enter one's classes at the beginning of any given year—even after a rough division is made according to merit—are a pretty miscellaneous lot. Some have given their English careful attention during their high-school days; others evidently have spent their time in social diversion or have given their energy to football; still others have had inefficient teachers or have substituted wood-shop for the classics; and many more have had little, if any, home training. The task of the English teacher is to enlist the sympathy of each individual student, and to get as much honest work from him as is possible. The system of marking individual themes must be sufficiently elastic to allow for the improvement of the brightest as well as the dullest student. With this in view the explanation should be made frankly, after the students are well started and have felt that their marks are lower than they had anticipated, that the grades mean nothing in particular except to indicate the room each still has for improvement. It is well to counsel them to forget all about their grades and to pay attention to the constructive suggestions in an effort to remedy their faults. They should be led through sympathy, at this point in their work, rather than driven by harshness. Another explanation is that the final grade for each student will be based pretty largely on the amount of individual effort and the resulting improvement that is made during the year.

It is useless to hold a student who has sufficient credits to enter one's class responsible for his lack of previous training; the milk is already spilled, and there is little to be gained by crying

over it. It is better to assure each one—no difference how poor his work may be at the start—that this will not be held against him, provided he does sufficient work to improve himself so that he is able, after a while, to write with a reasonable degree of correctness and intelligence. It is necessary, for protection, to assume that the improvement shall be continuous and not spasmodic. In addition, the best students should be warned that, unless their writing shows improvement, they cannot expect a high final grade. Experience has shown me that this sort of treatment appeals to everyone as fair. It produces results, too; not infrequently I have given some of my best final marks to boys who had come to college with a general lack of training in English, but with the ambition to excel. This is distinctly worth while, inasmuch as it is so fashionable for English teachers, from behind their desks, to wag their superior, discouraging heads at all who do poor work at the beginning of the year.

3. Another explanation which naturally comes later is that the standard of grading is gradually being raised. This prevents any large number of students from attaining too easily the grade of A. It also takes care of the laggard, the individual who thinks he can manage to make a grade without doing any work at all. He awakens one bright morning to find that he is floating with the current, that his grades are becoming lower and lower. Some teachers prefer to awaken such a student as early in the term as possible by rapidly lowering his grades to below passing. This ordinarily causes him some uneasiness; if it does not, it is easy to assign him to a tutor or to report him to the dean of the college. If this, too, fails, he can expect nothing but to be dropped from class. This method of raising the standard as the year progresses is in rather wide usage. In large departments, where it is necessary to keep the grading of the individual instructors as nearly uniform as is possible, it is necessary at intervals to ask the various teachers to grade the same themes, which have been taken from actual class assignments, and then later to come together to discuss the grades given each theme. At Harvard this is done at intervals of two or three months, and at the University of Illinois more frequently. Many high schools use a similar method of



departmental conference. While these conferences are not intended to result in the derivation of an exact scale, they do keep the grading of individual teachers from diverging far from the average standard of the department.

4. In the class discussions, as well as in the personal conferences, emphasis should be placed on the fact that the grades indicate habits of thought, individuality, and general intelligence rather than merely faults in technique. This does not mean that the faults in technique are in any way to be overlooked; it means rather that the teacher, instead of boring the student to death by counting the exact number of comma blunders, should explain the relation of this sort of error to clear thinking and accurate expression. With a little study practically every technical error can be connected with some process of thought. Of course, as with any device, it would be possible to carry this sort of thing to a ridiculous extreme. Its use, however, should be understood by all who have had experience in teaching composition; nearly every student can be made to feel the practical necessity of attaining the ability to put his thought in order and to express this clearly and concisely; on the other hand, it may be safely affirmed that not one student in twenty-five cares a straw about the rules of formal grammar or rhetoric. We as English teachers have still much to learn from the apothecary in the art of administering the sugar-coated pill. In this connection, it may be affirmed that the thought contained in selected essays and the refined pleasure expressed in pieces of general literature should occupy no small share of the class discussion.<sup>1</sup> Unless the teacher can generate enthusiasm among his students for certain subjects of thought and for certain problems of literary feeling, in addition to making them desire to write from their own personal experience, he is likely to find that they will think of theme-writing as just so much more drudgery to be slighted whenever possible.

5. The comments are of far greater importance than the mark which is given the theme. These should be stern and yet kindly. While they should overlook no error, they should, in addition,

<sup>1</sup> Few teachers have recently counseled more wisely in this regard than has Professor Aydelotte in his essays which deal with the teaching of composition, *The Oxford Stamp* (New York, 1917).

be constructive and optimistic. It is necessary, above all, for the teacher to enter intimately and sympathetically into the problems of the student.

6. In making up the final grades, the teachers of the department should derive somewhat roughly from their class themes a standard; almost any of the objective scales will prove suggestive in arriving at such an agreement. The minimal requirements for passing should be especially clearly defined, as also should the requirements for the grade of A. The general principles of the Missouri system should then be applied to local conditions so that the grades may be properly distributed. Without these last considerations, almost any system of marking may easily become too pliable. In large departments their use helps correct the judgment of the individual instructor without coercing unduly his personal initiative.

In summary, these suggestions assume that the personal relation between the teacher and the student in a composition course is important. Unless the teacher can encourage the best effort of his industrious, capable student by gradually raising the grades throughout the year, and unless he can awaken the sluggard from ennui by lowering the grades at will, he is not likely to get the best work from either. These suggestions assume, further, a certain necessary relationship between the teacher and the registrar. The final grade should be as fair to the student as possible; its use lies entirely in giving the student the proper credit toward his degree.

These various suggestions are not, however, intended as the final word concerning the marking of themes. Human nature is too complex and elusive ever to be fully satisfied with a formula; boys and girls (not to mention teachers of English) are too varied in personality ever to be fabricated like Christmas dolls in a toy factory. The suggestions do allow a maximum of elasticity; they require a keen discernment and close attention to the individual student. In common with all methods for handling composition, they cannot give the teacher who is lacking in judgment or in common sense a magic yardstick which he can apply universally. They cannot lend the student who is short in brains or in taste

a glucose diet and at the same time give him a high mark in his English. They have, however, proved of value in keeping at work at least a few of the students who have come in rather close contact with the writer. It is from this obvious, pragmatic point of view that they should be judged.

In their larger aspect, they may be found suggestive to the ordinary teacher of English who is attempting to make some use of the various derived scales. The past decade has given us the scales; there remains for the coming decade the problem of applying these to local conditions everywhere. In all of our discussion we must never forget that

There are two laws discrete,  
Not reconciled,  
Law for man, and law for thing.

Students, if given a fair chance, occasionally show elemental gropings in the direction of manhood. Themes have, for the most part, human values. Grading scales, when all is said, are made for teachers of English and not teachers of English for grading scales.